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New programs called "browser assistants" try to anticipate a Web user's needs and serve the information up on one's screen. The programs are available for free and downloadable from the companies' Web sites.

**Full Text** (862 words)*Copyright Newsweek, Incorporated Mar 13, 2000***[Headnote]**

Software tools that fetch info from the Internet and bring it to you-often before you even ask

WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT IF the Web knew what you were looking for and just: served it up, right there on your screen? For those of us accustomed to the keyword-and-search routine, it sounds nearly impossible. But that's precisely what a handful of companies are trying to make happen.

Called "browser assistants," these new programs-available for free and downloadable from the companies' Web sites try to anticipate your information needs. For example, say you're looking at a news story about [Microsoft](#). Using a variety of techniques, these programs fetch relevant information out of the depths of the Web and deliver it to you, saving you the effort of searching those depths yourself. Stock quotes, news from a variety of other Web sites, online chat conversations, the [Microsoft](#) online store, all right there.

It's a tricky concept to grasp, and each program we looked at takes a different approach. flyswat, a start-up in San Francisco (flyswat.com), does it by inserting yellow, rather than the usual blue, hyperlinks into your Web pages. This yellow "flycon" indicates that there's specially prepared, valuable information hidden just below. Here's the twist: when you click on a flycon, instead of getting sucked away to a new page as you do when you click on a regular hyperlink, a small box pops up on top of your browser page, leaving your previous reading experience intact.

Another program called GuruNet (gurunet.com) does more or less the same thing. Instead of clicking on yellow flycons, you simply click on any word within a document using a special key combination. A small GuruNet window opens providing more information, pulled down across the Web from a distant server. We alt-clicked on the word "Cosby" in a TVshow time listing and received a biographical-encyclopedia entry, the comedian's vital stats ("Date of birth: July 12, 1937") and a list of his books provided by Amazon .com. What's nifty about GuruNet is that you can perform the same trick on nonWeb pages like word-processing documents or within e-mail messages.

A company called Quiver (quiver.com) attaches a task bar to your browser window, just below the main control panel at the top. They call it the "Qbar"; within it, the most interesting button is labeled TOPICS. Click on it and a menu drops down to show big categories of sites that might interest you like Alternative Medicine, Cool Sites, Music, News & Media. Under each heading is a list of recommended Web sites that is updated every day, based on the sites' popularity among Quiver users. The logic here is simple: follow the crowd. In the Alternative Medicine topic area, for example, the top sites in descending rank of popularity were AlternativeMedicine.com, followed by the home page for the Natural Health and Longevity Resource Center and wholehealthmd.com. Quiver CEO Scott Potter explains that Web surfers themselves are the best tool for finding great sites on the Web. "It's not like [Yahoo!](#) where you've got some editor who only revisits the sites every now and then," he says. "My judgment of the best soccer sites is better than any editor at [Yahoo](#). Add my expertise to that of 500 other fanatics and you're going to get very relevant information."

Two other companies-Autonomy and Third Voice-have yet to launch their browser assistants, but they sound promising. Autonomy's product, Kenjin, not only gathers news from Web pages but also pulls supplemental information from your own hard drive. Third Voice creates a new windowpane within your browser, where its server shows you relevant links to any word that you select in a given Web page.

One company is banking on the notion that no software tool can beat a real, live person. iNetNow, a Los Angeles-based start-up launching this week, offers a free-for-now Web-based answer service at 888INET-NOW. "We're like the answer man at the New York Public Library," says iNetNow CEO Lenny Young.

Let us be the judge of that:

\* What's the name of the 1998 2-year-old racehorse of they ear?"I don't know a whole lot about racehorses myself, but let's try," says our 22-year-old surfer-for-hire, Dave, who's a musician and aspiring screenwriter when he's not Webbing for dollars. Answer: "Dracula." (Actually, it was Answer Lively, the colt, and Silverbulletday, the Philly.) Time elapsed: six minutes.

\* Are the stories told at the beginning of the movie "Magnolia" true? After collaborating with other surfers in the office, Dave tells me: "The man who jumped off a building only to be shot halfway down is false. The scuba diver one, also false." The third story-about three men named Green, Berry and Hill who were hanged on Greenberry Hill in London- seems to be true. "But we're not finding any definitive proof" Time elapsed: 10 minutes.

Apparently, definitive answers from the Web aren't always easy to find or discern-- even by a real, live person. But we'll give Dave an A for effort.

#### [Sidebar]

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